

Benefits of and barriers to romantic relationships among mothers in Ireland

Kristin Hadfield<sup>1,2</sup> & Elizabeth Nixon<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Queen Mary University of London

<sup>2</sup> Trinity College Dublin

Author Note

Kristin Hadfield, Department of Biological and Experimental Psychology, Queen Mary University of London; Elizabeth Nixon, School of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:* Kristin Hadfield. Fogg Building, Department of Biological and Experimental Psychology, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London, UK E1 4NS. kristinmaryhadfield@gmail.com

## Abstract

**Objective:** This research examines what mothers expect of their romantic relationships, as well as what prevents them from forming and maintaining relationships.

**Background:** Although there has been research on mothers' attitudes towards and expectations of marriage, there has been limited examination of their dating. It is critical to understand why parents form romantic relationships and what might cause them to cycle into and out of relationships in order to understand stepfamily formation.

**Method:** This was investigated through semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of 33 single or repartnered Irish mothers. We conducted a thematic analysis, guided by a social exchange framework.

**Results:** Mothers believed that being in a relationship would allow them to enact their preferred relationship roles, give them extra support, and provide an opposite gender role model for their child(ren). They found forming long-term relationships difficult because of a lack of suitable partners, limited time and support, stepparents' possible negative influences on their child(ren), and their personal characteristics. Unlike previous studies conducted in the United States, Irish mothers were not focused on the economic viability of partners nor on economic benefits of repartnering.

**Conclusions:** Mothers believe there are several rewards to forming and being in a relationship, but they face many impediments which may prevent them from forming long-term relationships.

**Implications:** Practitioners may find it useful to focus on tempering mothers' expectations of relationship benefits as well as on reducing mothers' personal costs when forming and maintaining relationships.

*Keywords: mothers, romantic relationships, dating, repartnering, thematic analysis, Ireland*

### Benefits of and Barriers to Romantic Relationships among Mothers in Ireland

There is relatively little research directly investigating dating among mothers. The research that has been done in this area has tended to be on the attitudes of mothers—particularly low-income mothers—toward marriage (e.g., Bzostek, McLanahan, & Carlson, 2012; Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008; Edin, 2000; Edin & Kefalas, 2011; Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Hitchens & Payne, 2017). However, each romantic relationship that divorced and never married mothers have is unlikely to lead to (re)marriage (Anderson et al., 2004; Gray, Garcia, Crosier, & Fisher, 2015), suggesting that attention should be paid to their dating as well. The relationships mothers form are much more likely to be unstable dating or cohabiting relationships than marriages (Beck, Cooper, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010; Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Indeed, nearly 40% of American mothers date multiple partners within two years of divorce (Langlois, Anderson, & Greene, 2015). Relationship transitions may be stressful (Hadfield, Amos, Ungar, Gosselin, & Ganong, in press) and tend to lead to worse physical and mental health outcomes for mothers and children in both the short and long-term (Bachman, Coley, & Carrano, 2011; Osborne, Berger, & Magnuson, 2012). Although researchers have investigated mothers' expectations of marriage and the early stages of stepfamily life, few studies have been conducted that examined the initial connection between a mother and her partner, the rewards mothers believe romantic relationships will confer, or the impediments they perceive to the formation and maintenance of relationships. In this study, we attempt to fill this gap through a qualitative investigation of mothers' perceptions of the benefits of and barriers to forming and being in a relationship with someone who is not the father of their child(ren).

This study is informed by the social exchange framework (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), which suggests that people attempt to maximize the rewards they get from a relationship while minimizing the

costs resulting from that relationship. This framework focuses upon the development and stability of relationships, as well as the factors mediating that stability, and therefore is a good framework within which to study dating and the development of romantic relationships. A key focus of the theory is the role that individuals' expectations play in the evaluation of relationships (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). The decision of single mothers to form a relationship and then either continue or terminate the relationship is based on their own experiences in the relationship and in past relationships, as well as perceptions about how the current relationship compares to what they expect would be experienced in an alternative relationship (or on their own), and to what they believe others are experiencing in their relationships. From the social exchange perspective, mothers will attempt to form and maintain relationships with the most rewards (e.g., pleasure, status) and the fewest costs (e.g., effort, forgone opportunities) relative to their experiences and perceptions.

Humans have a strong drive to form relationships (Baumeister, 2011), with a particularly strong desire for the sexual and emotional intimacy that romantic relationships can provide (Sassler, 2010). Single mothers actively seek relationships, go on dates, and are likely to form at least one romantic relationship within five years of the dissolution of the relationship with their child(ren)'s father (Beck et al., 2010; Gray et al., 2015). However, these relationships tend to be unstable (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007) or "pass through" relationships (Burton & Hardaway, 2012), and single mothers are less likely to get married than childless women (Graefe & Lichter, 2008; Lundberg, Pollak, & Stearns, 2016; Schneider & Hastings, 2015).

Romantic relationship formation can have many health and well-being benefits for mothers (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010; Williams & Umberson, 2004). Single mothers can benefit from the formation of a long-term romantic relationship or marriage through reductions in material hardship and psychological distress (Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003; Osborne et al., 2012; Williams, Sassler, &

Nicholson, 2008). However, the dissolution of the relationships that single mothers form can have particularly deleterious effects. When single mothers enter and then exit from a cohabiting relationship or marriage, they experience higher levels of poverty than never married single mothers (Lichter et al., 2003), as well as poorer physical and mental health (Williams et al., 2008). Additionally, these relationship transitions can negatively impact children, with each relationship formation and dissolution increasing children's anxious, somatic, and conduct problems (Bachman et al., 2011). Thus, the formation of long-lasting romantic relationships can be beneficial to mothers and their child(ren), but there are risks associated with the dissolution of these relationships.

Research on mothers' partnership transitions and marital beliefs has identified a number of factors that impede the formation and long-term success of romantic unions. Edin's (2000) examination of low-income mothers' views of marriage identified five reasons to avoid marriage or remarriage. Two focused on financial concerns: affordability (partners' earnings from a 'good job') and respectability (partners' current and prospective social class standing). Three were unrelated to finances: control (partners would reduce mothers' household and parental control), trust (stemming from negative experiences in previous relationships), and experiences of domestic violence. Sano, Manoogian, and Ontai's (2012) study of low-income, rural, mothers who experienced partnership changes during the course of their longitudinal research indicated that their relationship choices primarily centered around their children. Sano et al. found that partners' ability to be in a parental role, concerns about the impacts of partnering on their child(ren)'s well-being, and the availability of childcare support from their family of origin were central. In addition to concerns directly related to their children, partners' employment and earning potential also play a particularly important role in assessments about the viability of a relationship (Edin, 2000; Nelson, 2006; Sano et al., 2012). Many low-income single mothers struggle simply to find partners who are consistently employed (Edin & Kefalas, 2011; Sano et al., 2012).

Additional barriers to repartnering among single mothers include perceptions that available partners are irresponsible (Nelson, 2006) and that they are too old or have low socioeconomic status (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). In short, a (perceived) lack of suitable partners is a critical barrier to marriage for single mothers.

However, the impediments identified in the literature thus far may not be applicable to all single mothers attempting to negotiate romantic relationships. Both Edin's (2000) and Sano et al.'s (2012) samples included exclusively low-income women, and while all of the women in the latter study had experiencing some change in family structure, for some this was an on/off partnering with their children's father. Nelson (2006) focused on mothers' general incorporation of others into their families' lives, and De Graaf and Kalmijn (2003) investigated remarriages among the entire population, not only mothers. Further, aside from the De Graaf and Kalmijn study, these studies were all conducted with mothers in the United States. It is unclear the extent to which the same impediments are also experienced by single mothers from different socioeconomic and cultural contexts who attempt to partner with men who are not the fathers of their children.

In the present study, we attempt to close this gap in the literature by seeking to understand single mothers' views of their romantic relationship experiences among a sample of socioeconomically diverse women from a European culture. The majority of single mothers in Western affluent nations are not living in poverty (e.g., 40.5% and 27.4% of single mothers in the United States and Ireland, respectively, are living in poverty; Brady & Burroway, 2010) and those with better economic security may have different priorities in romantic relationships than do those with poorer economic security. Further, we include both repartnered and unpartnered mothers because (a) the relative stability of mothers' relationships tends to be low, with many rapidly cycling in and out relationships (Burton & Hardaway, 2012; Osborne et al., 2007), suggesting that it would be a false dichotomy to classify those in and those

out of relationships at the moment of recruitment as distinct populations; and (b) both repartnered and (presumably) unpartnered mothers have experienced and contemplated the benefits and costs of romantic relationship formation. Simply put, the purpose of the present qualitative analysis of interviews is to understand the perceived rewards of and barriers to romantic relationships for mothers.

## **Method**

### **Sample Recruitment and Characteristics**

Data from 33 mothers were collected as part of another study on stepparent–stepchild relationship development. A non-probabilistic purposive sampling strategy was employed, whereby participants were primarily ( $n = 21$ ) recruited through letters sent home from primary and secondary schools in and near Dublin, Ireland; these letters asked for participants from “non-traditional families.” The other participants were recruited via an Irish parenting forum ( $n = 7$ ) and through snowball sampling ( $n = 5$ ). To be included in this study, participants had to be mothers who were not in a romantic relationship with the father of their child(ren), and had to have a minor child who resided at least half of the week with them; this was determined through a screening phone call. Both single and repartnered women were included because we felt that all mothers would be able to discuss the rewards they expect from romantic relationships and what barriers they face forming and maintaining relationships. Fifty Euros (approximately \$65 USD at the time) were offered for participation.

Participating mothers ranged in age from 26 to 55 years ( $M = 38.9$ ,  $SD = 8.2$ ). Two were married and living with their husband (who was not the biological father of any of their children;  $M = 3.8$  years as a couple), four were cohabiting ( $M = 7.0$  years as a couple), seven were in a non-cohabiting relationship ( $M = 1.7$  years as a couple), and 20 were not in a romantic relationship at the time of their interview. Ten of the mothers were divorced or separated. Since having their first child, most of the mothers ( $n = 30$ ) had been in a romantic relationship with someone who was not the father of at least

one of their children. Two of the uncoupled mothers who had not formed a relationship since the birth of their eldest child said that they did not want to form a new relationship; all other uncoupled participants were open to forming a romantic relationship in the future. All the mothers had been in at least one heterosexual relationship in the past, and most ( $n = 32$ ) described themselves as predominantly or exclusively heterosexual.

Consistent with Irish demographics (95% White; Central Statistics Office, 2011), all participants were Caucasian. Twenty-seven of the mothers had at least some college education, one had not been educated beyond secondary school and five had less than a secondary school education. Fourteen mothers were employed full- or part-time, seven were students, seven were stay-at-home parents, three were unemployed, and two were retired. The mothers had a mean of 1.6 ( $SD = 0.8$ ) resident children and a mean of 1.9 biological children ( $SD = 1.1$ ); the nonresident children were aged 18 years or older and had moved out in their emerging adult years. Their resident biological children ranged from 9 months to 21 years of age. Of the 18 mothers who had more than one biological child, 10 had children with more than one man. The demographic details of each participant are provided in the Appendix A.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which took place with each mother individually between March 2012 and June 2013. The interviews were conducted by the first author in participants' homes ( $n = 27$ ), in a private room on the university campus ( $n = 5$ ), or in another private location ( $n = 1$ ). The analysis for the present study drew upon responses to the mothers' questions pertaining to romantic relationship formation, maintenance, and dissolution. Many of the single and partnered mothers brought up the rewards and barriers or costs of romantic relationships throughout the interviews in the context of responding to other interview prompts; these data were included in the analysis as well. Regardless of their relationship status, all of the mothers were asked to give a detailed



account of their dating history since having their first child. They were also asked about their feelings about being a mother, barriers to dating or forming a relationship, their feelings on the importance of their children getting on with any partners, and other questions about their romantic relationships. The complete interviews lasted about an hour ( $M = 61$ ,  $SD = 21$  minutes). All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed orthographically by the first author, then all identifying information was changed.

### **Analytic Approach**

The data were subjected to a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Data relating to the rewards that mothers believed romantic relationships could provide and their perception of the barriers to the development of unions were identified within each interview transcript, then inductively coded. First, the text was coded to indicate whether a reward or barrier was being described. Second, the text was coded with words and phrases that were descriptive of the coded text. Third, the descriptive codes were then re-examined and related codes were grouped together and sorted into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The data were continuously grouped and regrouped in an iterative process until all linked ideas were grouped into overarching themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Even then, the themes that had emerged continued to be refined through repeated readings of the data and through discussion and consensus between the authors. No minimum number of occurrences were set a priori, but each core theme that emerged in the final conceptualization of the data had been described by at least five mothers, and—with one exception—each subtheme was described by at least two mothers.

Attempts were made to ensure rigor throughout data collection and analysis. The first author wrote memos after each interview and made notes on emerging interpretations during the review of the transcripts and coding. Both authors met regularly to discuss coding and theme generation, and consensus about themes and subthemes was achieved through a process of continuous discussion between the authors. Additionally, referential adequacy was employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); this

describes the process where some data is held back until analysis is completed and then analysed separately to see if the results in both sets of data mirror one another. To do this, the authors set aside the interviews of 10 of the mothers and then compared those data to the tentative findings from the analysis of interviews with the other 23 mothers. Both analyses resulted in the same five themes, strengthening confidence in the findings. Finally, a group of text segments was distributed to two independent investigators at the authors' university who have experience with qualitative research. These researchers were given the same 14 randomly-selected text segments and were asked to (a) pair each text segment with a theme and subtheme, and (b) identify any additional constructs in the text segments which were not adequately captured in the themes and subthemes provided. They did not identify any additional constructs for the authors to consider, and 93% of their coded segments were coded the same as the two authors had coded them.

## **Results**

### **Benefits of Forming and Maintaining a Romantic Relationship**

It is important to understand why mothers might want to enter a romantic relationship and what rewards they think these relationships might accrue to their lives to understand how stepfamilies form and why they might dissolve. The mothers in this sample described three major rewards from entering a romantic relationship: instrumental and emotional support, the development of optimal relationship roles, and an other-gender role model for their child(ren) (see Table 1).

**Additional support.** The most commonly mentioned reward of having a partner was having a supportive ally with whom to share one's life. The parents felt "really lonely" (Sarah), "unsupported" (Katalin), and "overwhelmed with my role as a mum" (Ava). Mothers referred to both instrumental and emotional support as benefits of being in a relationship; although many mothers described wanting to share chores and responsibilities, the benefit that they most commonly described was being able to share

emotions and experiences with a partner. They particularly wanted to have someone with whom to discuss their child(ren) and who would share in the pride that they took in their child(ren)'s accomplishments. Margaret explained,

It'd be lovely sometimes just to have somebody to share. Share the highs and share the lows.

Like even when he [son] started walkin' and that, it was only me . . . it'd be nice to have somebody special to kinda say, "Look at the little person we've brought up."

This sentiment was echoed by Jane, who said,

You have a birthday party for them, he [son] goes to bed and you're left sitting [alone] . . . you'd love to turn around to somebody and [talk about the experience]. So it's mainly for *me*, that I miss support.

The mothers felt that no one else was as interested in their child(ren)'s accomplishments as they were, but that if they had a partner, that person would be similarly invested. In this way, a reward of forming a romantic relationship would be that they would be able to share their feelings of pride and concern about their child(ren) with someone else.

Many mothers focused on instrumental forms of support as well. They wanted a partner to help them with childcare and household tasks. They explained that they did not want to take care of themselves and their child(ren) on their own; having "an extra set of hands" (Mary) was an important reward of being in a relationship. Eleanor explained that when she started dating her husband, it was advantageous because they could, "just share chores even, just doin' stuff together is really nice."

The participants rarely mentioned economic benefits of having a partner. When they did, this was described in the form of occasionally giving money to the mothers, in the context of other types of support, or in general descriptions that having a partner would (or did) ease economic concerns.

The mothers regularly mentioned having limited resources, but they did not describe forming

relationships to gain another income or housing. When asked what it was like moving from being a single parent to having a partner, only one parent described financial support: Katalin said that her former partner would “financially offer to help on occasions” but that she “would repay him later.” In fact, although Mary was struggling financially, she explained that emotional and day-to-day support was more important than financial support, and her previous relationship had ended because her partner took a job in mainland Europe to provide for her and her children,

He felt that he had [to] earn money and my feeling was that money’s not the be all and end all . . . that is the main reason why that relationship broke down—because h- he felt that he should be earning money for the family [at the cost of spending time with the family].

As this example illustrates, emotional and instrumental support appear to have been a more salient reward than financial support for to the mothers in this study.

**Development or enactment of preferred relationship roles.** Romantic relationships allowed some mothers to clarify roles and responsibilities and to change how they enacted their relationships to better suit themselves. For these mothers, the formation of a new romantic relationship clearly demarcated the coparenting role as distinct from the (formerly) intimate partner role for the father(s) of their child(ren), helped to re-establish collapsed mother–child hierarchies, and allowed the mother to have a romantic identity in addition to her mothering identity.

These interparental relationships were often more enmeshed than the mothers desired, and this created some ongoing discomfort in the coparenting relationship. Forming a relationship with a partner was seen as a way of forcing fathers to disentangle their parenting and partner roles, and to let go of the latter. Patricia explained, “because I haven’t really dated anybody, I think it’s givin’ [the biological father] the wrong impression. . . He thinks that I’m goin’ to get back with him or something.” Similarly, Hailey explained that the father of her son, “probably lives in a bit of a muddled world; he still

introduces me to people as his wife—it just doesn’t seem to have sunk in [that we’re divorced] and that’s very frustrating.” She believed that forming a relationship would make it clear to her former partner that he could not continue to view her as his wife; it would allow her to establish clearer boundaries that defined any ongoing relationship solely around their shared coparenting responsibilities and interest.

Some mothers had also experienced what they perceived to be healthy shifts in their parent–child relationship upon the formation of romantic relationships by allowing the establishment of clear hierarchical role boundaries. For example, Amelia said that she “was very very very attached to her [daughter], as parents are but in a kind of very dependent way” prior to her relationship. However, having two “bosses in the house” who were “parenting her [daughter] together” had allowed the formation of a parental alliance and the rebuilding of a parent–child hierarchy that had at least partially collapsed in the absence of a resident coparent. These mothers wanted to avoid blurred parent–child role boundaries and viewed the introduction of a partner as having the potential to promote hierarchical parenting roles.

Finally, being in a romantic relationship allowed some mothers to enjoy other identities. That is, they considered themselves mothers first and foremost, but they also wanted to feel desired and to experience intimacy with another adult; the demands of single parenting left little time to pursue those interests. Relationships allowed these mothers to “kind of forget about your role as being a mom” (Ann) and establish identities beyond and unrelated to motherhood. Aideen described an occasion when this occurred for her, “for the first time in ages, I was with a man and I felt like a woman” rather than reduced to a mother and nothing else. Thus, forming a romantic relationship provided opportunities to re-establish a more well-rounded identity.

**Role models.** Some of the mothers in this sample felt that their children were missing out by not

having both male and female role models. Although the mothers took on dual roles of “mother, father” (Jane), they did not feel this was the same as having both masculine and feminine role models for their child(ren). The mothers in families where the father(s) were minimally or not involved in the child(ren)’s life were particularly concerned about this. They thought that it was important that their son(s) were not “surrounded by a huge amount of women” and were able get “the guy perspective” (Margaret). Hailey similarly felt that, “it’s important that he [son] does have a male influence in his life.” Although more common among mothers with sons, some mothers with daughters felt it was critical that their daughters had positive male role models as well; Helene explained that she wants a relationship “with a man that is *really* good” so that her daughter knows “what type of man would be good for her.” If the father or other male family members were heavily involved, then mothers did not tend to mention this as a reward, perhaps because they felt that their child(ren) already had a stable male role model. Mia, for example, said that her sons were not “lackin’ a male figure; they have their dad, they have my dad, and they have my brothers.” For some heterosexual mothers in this sample who did not feel that their child(ren) had a male role model, filling that gap was a noted reward of forming a relationship with a man.

### **Barriers to Romantic Relationships**

Although there were a number of advantages to romantic relationships, the mothers perceived considerable barriers and associated costs as well (see Table 1). First, their limited time and support prevented them from dating. Second, they felt that there was a lack of suitable partners. Third, they believed that their personal characteristics and experiences were not conducive to forming long-term romantic relationships. Finally, some mothers felt that their relationship formation would have a negative influence on their child(ren).

**Limited time and support.** Single mothers have substantial demands on their time and may not

have the social or economic resources to form romantic relationships. A large proportion of the mothers explained that it was difficult for them to form relationships because they did not have time to go on dates or were not able to pay for a babysitter and did not have people in their lives who would watch their child(ren) without payment.

These mothers found that their responsibilities to their child(ren) put constraints on their time which hindered the development of a romantic relationship. Eleanor explained, “when you have kids you feel you haven’t really got that spare time” to date. They were tired and adding a commitment to another person to their lives was viewed as a cost rather than a reward. Katalin said, “to be goin’ out every other weekend or whatever [laughs] just seems like work to me. I just don’t think I’d really have the time, you know? . . . They [children] just take up so much time.”

Mothers often found that potential partners did not make allowances for their parental responsibilities. Moira explained that her former partners wanted to do things without planning but that with kids she had to plan:

Sometimes they struggle with that because even if we were just going to do something simple like have dinner, I would want to know what day next week we were going to have dinner so that I could arrange that I have a babysitter.

Similarly, Emily’s former partner would ask if they could “go away this weekend,” and she would routinely reply, “no. I have to sort the kids out first.” The mothers’ relationships had to be enacted differently from the relationships of women without children because of the demands on their time, which required that partners be understanding and willing to work around the mothers’ schedules. However, not all partners were willing to be accommodating and this was an impediment to many mothers’ romantic relationship formation and maintenance.

Another barrier to forming relationships was a lack of support. Some mothers in this sample

explained that it is necessary to “have a massive support system where you’ve got people to take care of your child” (Amelia) to have one-on-one time with a new partner. Without a large support network, dating meant involving the child(ren) in their romantic relationship right away or spending money on babysitters. Mary explained, “You almost do rely on your friends to say, “Yeah, I’ll take the kids for a weekend.” Or, “I’ll take the kids overnight” or whatever so that you can actually maybe have a night out where you can meet somebody.” Mothers who had family members or friends who would watch their child(ren) at no cost seemed to find dating much easier than those who did not have that support in place, but this type of support tended not to be consistently available for most mothers. A lack of social support was thus a major barrier to relationship formation because most mothers did not have an income that could support regularly paying for babysitters. This was particularly the case when children did not spend much or any time with their fathers; mothers whose children spent considerable time with their fathers could date without the need for babysitters dating when the children were with their father.

**Lack of suitable partners.** Many mothers “haven’t seen anybody” (Patricia) that they were interested in dating. Margaret explained, “I have the time and the interest but there’s nobody [of interest] there.” Potential partners were deemed unsuitable either because of the characteristics of the men themselves or because of a mismatch between the expectations and desires of the mothers and those of the men they had encountered. For example, the mothers reported that many potential partners were undesirable, would not date them because they have a child or children, had incompatible plans with regard to having more children, or had children of their own—which was a complicating factor.

The mothers tended to focus on negative physical or personality traits when describing why partners were not suitable, describing shortcomings such as not “tall enough or ambitious or there was very little intelligence” (Helene). Due to these and similar flaws, the mothers chose not to date as opposed to dating men they did not perceive as adequate according to their expectations. Ann explained



that she perceived that young mothers to be particularly susceptible to “predators,” and she had experienced bad relationships, so she was being overly cautious with dating, and she perceived that to be a good thing because, in her view, the costs of her forming a relationship with an unsuitable partner are too substantial to outweigh any potential relationship rewards.

A few of the mothers had found that “some guys do not want to be involved with someone with a child” (Beth). A few mothers indicated the lack of potential partners willing to date a single parent had diminished their own interest in dating. Stacy stated, “when you get told ‘cause you have kids they’re not interested . . . you get a bit disheartened.” These mothers felt that their partner choices were limited because so many potential partners did not want to date a single mother.

A small group of the mothers explained that their choices of partners were further limited because they did not want to have more children. Mary had recently had a tubal ligation and could not have any more children; this was a complicating factor in her relationship with her most recent partner, who “would like to have children.” Mia similarly “never wanted more children.” Éilís explained that from the “very beginning” of her most recent relationship, she “had said to him, ‘Uh yeah, if you want kids, you may look for someone else.’” Because some potential partners wanted to have biological children of their own, their preference to not have more children limited their pool of potential partners.

Finally, some of the mothers further limited their dating pool because they felt that dating someone who had children of their own would complicate the relationship too much. Perhaps ironically, some of these mothers viewed dating a father as a substantial cost and preferred to avoid such men. Hailey, for example, described her previous partners’ children as “baggage” and indicated that she had ended multiple relationships with fathers because, “when you have a child and you’re kinda looking after them mostly as the *main* parent, you don’t need extra” children to complicate matters.

**Personal characteristics.** Some of the personal characteristics of the mothers limited their

ability to form sustainable romantic relationships. They explained that they were impeded from forming and maintaining relationships by their own inability to commit, a preference to dissolve relationships rather than work through difficulties, satisfaction with their single parent identity, and wariness from negative experiences in previous relationships.

These mothers tended not to want to stay in relationships that they did not believe were optimal, perhaps showing little patience with less-than-optimal relationships because many among them viewed themselves as “not the marrying type” (Éilís). “The whole marriage thing and the movin’ in together completely freaked the crap out of” these mothers (Amelia). Although staying in a dysfunctional relationship is problematic, many of the mothers described how good they were at leaving suboptimal relationships; none described having skills at compromising or working through relationship issues. For example, Mia explained, “I’m quite good at acknowledging something’s not workin’ and *briskly* finishin’ it and walkin’ away.” Their hesitancy about relationships and lack of desire to work through relationship issues was a barrier to long-term relationship formation.

A few of the mothers felt that their own identity was an impediment to the formation of a romantic relationship. They had formed stable identities as single parents and the feeling that their view of themselves would change if they formed a relationship was described as a cost to partnering. Aideen explained that, particularly when meeting other single mothers who had supports in place, she felt a sense of superiority because she was doing it all on her own, and she acknowledged that partnering would deny her that source of pride. In short, the mothers who expressed these concerns were uneasy with the prospect of changing their single-mother identities to accommodate a partner.

Some of the mothers in this sample described negative dating experiences that subsequently prevented them from forming new relationships. They had “got very hurt” (Sarah) in the past and “put up a guard against anyone comin’ in to hurt me again” (Nicola). Emily explained that she had “an awful

lot of commitment issues” stemming from her relationship with her children’s father and acknowledged that those experienced had a negative “impact on lettin’ another man” into her life. Similarly, Jane described that after having two marriages dissolve, she did not want to form another relationship: “once bitten, twice shy; twice bitten, not going there.” In this way, an injurious relationship history was a barrier to the formation of new romantic relationships.

**Negative influence on child(ren).** A few of the mothers thought that dating would negatively impact their children. Entering a relationship was seen as undesirable because doing so could divert the mothers’ time and attention away from her children, and the involvement of a stepfather had the potential to change the father’s involvement in the children’s lives. These worries were framed as a cost to the mothers and impeded their motivation to form a romantic relationship.

Separate from not having the time to date, these mothers had the time, but did not want to trade time with their child(ren) for time with a romantic partner. Sinéad said,

If I was to take time out for somebody, that would be taking time away from my son, and if it turned out that that person wasn’t worth it then I think I’d resent the fact that I used the time that I could have spent with my son with somebody else.

Many mothers felt uncomfortable with this distraction from parenting time because they thought spending less time with their child(ren) would negatively impact the child(ren)’s well-being.

Changes in the father’s involvement with the child(ren) were also seen as a potential cost of forming a new romantic relationship. For some mothers, there was a fear that if they began dating, the father(s) of their child(ren) would decrease their involvement. Patricia explained, “If I was datin’ somebody, I’d be afraid that he’d [her sons’ father] kind of neglect the boys because he wouldn’t be able to cope with me being with somebody else.” Ava had experienced this; the father of one of her children, “was offering to help with the kids and we were kind of in a good terms, but I met [a new partner], and

he got pretty jealous and this has ended up very badly. . . . he [the father] disappeared.” Other mothers had the opposite concern—they worried that if they started dating then the father(s) would become more involved. These mothers viewed the father’s involvement as detrimental to the child(ren)’s well-being. Amelia experienced this when her most recent relationship “coincided with her [daughter’s] biological father taking an interest,” which was frustrating for Amelia because the father’s increased interest had caused “turmoil.” Thus, for these mothers, forming a romantic relationship came with the risk of potentially provoking an unwanted change in the father’s involvement that the mothers perceived to be detrimental for the child(ren)’s well-being.

Taken as a whole, these mothers were not concerned about a new partner having a direct negative influence on their child(ren). Rather, they were concerned about the potential of a stepparent negatively affect their child(ren) was through indirect means, such as reducing their own time with their children or having a knock-on effect on the biological father’s involvement. Thus, the mothers were not protecting their children from any direct danger they intuited from a stepparent, but instead they were protecting their children from the secondary negative effects that they believed of having a partner might produce.

### **Discussion**

It is important to understand why single mothers want to be in a relationship and what impedes them from forming and maintaining these relationships to understand relational instability and the development of stepfamily relationships. Although relational instability may have negative effects (Bachman et al., 2011), the formation of a long-term romantic relationship or marriage can result in reductions in material hardship and psychological distress (Lichter et al., 2003; Osborne et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2008) and may result in a relationship which is beneficial for the children involved (King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014). The present study was broadly underpinned by a social exchange framework, which has effectively been used to explain processes of relationship formation. Mothers’

narratives of relationship formation and maintenance reflected concepts such as benefits, rewards, costs, and resources that partners bring to relationships, all of which are central to exchange theories (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). In our sample, mothers thought that forming a romantic relationship would be beneficial because it would allow them to clarify or develop the relationship roles that they wanted, give their child a male role model, and provide emotional and instrumental support. They were impeded from forming long-term unions by limited time and support, a lack of suitable partners, their personal characteristics, and their view that forming a relationship may harm their child(ren).

Almost all the mothers in this sample had formed one or more relationships with someone who was not the father of their child(ren), indicating that the barriers to and costs of relationship formation described by these mothers are not insurmountable. They continued to form relationships even where they perceived considerable personal, structural, and familial impediments. However, more than half the mothers were not in a relationship with anyone at the time of their participation in this study: although they were forming relationships, their unions often did not endure. This is in line with other Irish research showing that the number of children in a stepfamily household at any given time is considerably smaller than the number living in single mother households (Fahey, Keilthy, & Polek, 2012; Hadfield & Nixon, 2012, 2013). Further, although the sample was not representative, a third of the mothers had experienced multipartner fertility, indicating that this is likely a common experience among Irish mothers.

### **Economic Context in Partnering**

Much of the research on romantic relationships among single mothers has been carried out in the United States, and has focused predominantly on low-income women (e.g. Cherlin et al., 2008; Edin, 2000). Single mothers in the United States tend to be more impoverished than in other Western countries (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Smeeding & Thévenot, 2016); consequently, findings from the United States

may not be applicable to mothers in other countries. Perhaps because of the greater welfare support that Irish mothers have in comparison to American mothers, the mothers in this sample were considerably less focused on the economic viability of their partners or of economic benefits to their repartnering than mothers have been reported to be in the United States. In this regard, Irish mothers' experiences seem to be more consistent with those in New Zealand, where one study found that only 6% of single parents and stepmothers/stepfathers described financial support as a motivation for repartnering (Cartwright, 2010). None of the mothers in our study described not dating someone or dissolving a relationship because their partner was unemployed or underemployed, whereas in other studies this was described by mothers as a reason to leave a relationship, even with a father of their child(ren) (Edin, 2000; Nelson, 2006).

Additionally, none of the parents described negotiating their relationships as a strategy to gain housing stability, which is something low-income mothers in the United States do (Clark, Burton, & Flippen, 2011). It is possible that because of greater social welfare supports, single parents in Ireland do not have the pressing need to find a partner who can provide financially, and thus do not need to rely on their partners to be employed or to provide economic support. This is in line with Cancian and Meyer's (2014) finding that income increases are associated with lower cohabitation rates between mothers and stepfathers because mothers are less likely to need to partner for purely economic reasons. Mothers in Ireland—who are relatively economically secure—do not appear to view the un- or underemployment of a partner to be a major cost in the same way that American mothers do.

### **Applications of the Research**

These results could inform the content of relationship and marriage enrichment programs, along with the work of counsellors, therapists, and other service providers who work with single mothers, couples, and families. Single mothers may be quicker to dissolve relationships than non-mothers

because of a concern about the well-being of their children—weighing the costs and benefits of maintaining a less-than-optimal relationship not only for themselves, but also for their children. One focus of work with single mothers could be around reducing the personal costs of forming and maintaining relationships. For example, programs could provide strategies for leveraging time for forming relationships; either through bolstering mothers' support systems or through direct program provisions for helping to care for children. Mothers' concerns about negatively impacting the father–mother relationship and the father–child relationship were a barrier to dating, so another possibility would be to focus on the coparenting relationship between a father and mother to promote mothers' romantic relationship formation. In this way, the costs and barriers identified in this research could be used as a guide for what mothers are dealing with when attempting to date, how they weigh their dating decisions, and how relational instability may most effectively be addressed.

The results of this study suggest that if these barriers to romantic relationship development are removed, mothers would be able and motivated to form relationships. However, mothers may be disappointed if the rewards of repartnering do not live up to their expectations that forming a relationship will lead to the development or enactment of preferred relationship roles, provide an masculine gender role model, or provide them with additional emotional and instrumental support. This research thus proposes that practitioners working with mothers could also focus on their expectations for relationships. If the rewards associated with the relationships are not strong then even small costs may lead to relationship dissolution (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

In terms of government policy, the finding that mothers did not identify economic utility or economic constraints of partners as being either a benefit or barrier to relationship formation in this sample raises questions about the role of social welfare programs in the romantic relationships of single mothers. The generous social welfare provisions provided to single mothers in Ireland represents a

distinct policy context from that of the United States, for example, where marriage promotion programs have received a great deal of government funding, with the goal of strengthening couple relationships to alleviate poverty (Avishai, Heath, 2016). Mothers with income stability may be able to focus on different aspects when partnering. Indeed, Schneider (2015) suggests that increasing women's economic resources may increase the likelihood of marriage. It is possible that Irish mothers' relative affluence has the potential to protect relationships with un- or underemployed men who are otherwise suitable partners. Future research which compares mothers from countries with different welfare systems to look at their rates of romantic relationship formation and dissolution could have important implications for policy makers. If the length and quality of mothers' relationships was affected by social welfare policies, this would suggest a new route through which policies could function. Given that marriage promotion programs do not appear to result in large changes in marriage behaviors—only small (if any) changes in marriage rates and poverty reduction have been found (Avishai, Heath, & Randles, 2015; Hawkins, Amato, & Kinghorn, 2013; Heath, 2013; Hsueh et al., 2012; Rhoades, 2015)—future interventions may benefit from a two-pronged approach. It may be that relationships are longer-lasting and more likely to lead to marriage when relationship functioning *and* economic stability are addressed, rather than focusing on one or the other. Although speculative, this suggests a potential area for future examination and intervention.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Caution should be taken when attempting to generalize these findings to other populations. The findings here feature potentially important differences from those of similar research in the United States (e.g., Edin, 2000), indicating that sociocultural factors may play an important role in mothers' views on the benefits of and barriers to their relationships. This research was carried out on a community sample of Caucasian women in Dublin; it is not clear how the findings would differ in other Western countries



or in non-Western samples.

The heterogeneity of the sample is both a strength and a limitation of this study (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995; Robinson, 2014). Much of the research on mothers' romantic relationship formation and maintenance with men who are not the fathers of their children has had relatively homogeneous samples—focusing exclusively on women who are not currently in a cohabiting relationship (e.g., Nelson, 2004), or low-income mothers (e.g., Edin, 2000; Sano et al., 2012), for example. However, in an attempt to be consistent with the relative relational volatility (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Magnuson & Berger, 2009) and socioeconomic diversity (Brady & Burroway, 2010) of single mothers, we took a different approach with the present study. The sample was comprised of a heterogeneous mix of partnered and unpartnered mothers, some of whom were low-income and others who were not.

This analysis is limited by its reliance on interviews with mothers only, neglecting the viewpoints of both mothers' partners and fathers. A study which followed newly partnered parents and their partners over time would provide a better understanding of why these relationships are formed and why they might dissolve. Understanding mothers' romantic partners' expectations at the start of the relationship would help relationship enhancement programs target differences between relationship expectations and the reality of stepfamily living. Finally, although women are overwhelmingly the primary caregivers to their child(ren), there are many single fathers in this role as well (Fahey et al., 2012). There is limited research on the barriers to relationship formation for fathers, but unwed fathers “exhibit lower age-cumulative rates of marriage than the general population of men” (Lichter & Graefe, 2007, p. 417) and so they must encounter some barriers to marriage that childless men do not face. An examination of the rewards and costs that these fathers perceive to union formation would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the early stages of stepmother–family formation.

Finally, it would be useful to test specific relationships between these themes, such as how the expected rewards and costs interact at the initial formation of a relationship as well as throughout their coupling. It may be, for example, that when mothers expect to get certain rewards from their relationships and then these do not materialize, this impedes the long-term maintenance of their relationship; in this way, a lack of expected rewards may not impede the *formation* of a relationship but could be a barrier to the *maintenance* of that relationship. Development of a survey that incorporates questions about the three rewards and four barriers derived from our data in the present study would be useful for capturing how mothers' relationship decisions are made, how this changes over time and in different contexts, and for understanding how different rewards and barriers interact to affect union quality and stability.

## Conclusions

To understand stepfamily formation, it is critical to understand why parents form relationships and what might cause them to cycle into and out of relationships. Mothers in this sample saw many rewards to forming and being in a relationship, such as the enactment of their preferred relationship roles, availability of a male role model for their child(ren), as well as social and instrumental support. Relationships were impeded by their personal characteristics, a lack of suitable partners, limited time, and the perception that dating may have a negative influence on their child. If mothers form multiple short-term romantic relationships, children may experience more instability, and this may have negative effects on both children and mothers (Bachman et al., 2011; Hadfield & Nixon, 2017; Williams et al., 2008). Romantic relationships should not be viewed as a panacea, but given that many mothers will form (and often dissolve) relationships, it is important to understand their expectations and experiences. The rewards of and costs to relationships identified in this research provide a guide for how service providers can address mothers' relationship formation and maintenance.

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Table 1

*Summary of Themes Relating to the Benefits of and Barriers to Relationships*

Theme	Subtheme	Partnered ( <i>n</i> = 13) (%)	Unpartnered ( <i>n</i> = 20) (%)
<b>Rewards from Romantic Relationships</b>			
Additional support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotional support and shared understanding</li> <li>Childcare and household work support</li> </ul>	87.5	57.1
Development or enactment of preferred relationship roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishment of relationship boundaries for the father</li> <li>Encourages a more hierarchical power structure for parent-child relationship</li> <li>Allows parent to have a role outside of their position as a single parent</li> </ul>	4.2	26.2
Role models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Importance of the child having both male and female role models</li> </ul>	8.3	16.7
<b>Costs and Barriers to Romantic Relationships</b>			
Limited time and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of time available for dating</li> <li>Lack of understanding from partners that parent is busy with childcare responsibilities</li> <li>Need a support system to watch child in order to go on dates</li> </ul>	31.1	39.7
Lack of suitable partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Available partners are undesirable</li> <li>Potential partners do not want to date a single parent</li> <li>Potential partners have to be accepting of the parents' future reproductive plans</li> <li>Potential partners tend to have children from previous relationships</li> </ul>	22.2	39.7
Personal characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preference to dissolve relationships which do not meet expectations</li> <li>Self-representation as a single parent</li> <li>Wariness around romantic relationships based on previous negative experiences</li> </ul>	37.8	15.9
Negative influence on children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of time for parent to spend with child may negatively impact child</li> <li>Increase father's involvement with child</li> <li>Decrease father's involvement with child</li> </ul>	8.9	4.8

*Note:* The percentages of each theme were calculated separately for the rewards and the costs/barriers (i.e., both rewards and barriers add individually to 100% for both partnered and unpartnered mothers). Due to rounding, not all percentages add to exactly 100.